

## Avant-Garde or Dogmatic? DA-RT in the Mirror of the Social Sciences

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In defending the DA-RT initiative, [Lupia and Elman \(2014\)](#) argue: “For subfields that hold that inferential procedures are repeatable, openness is a necessary condition for replication. For these communities, replication of another’s claims provides increased confidence in the validity of that work.” On the surface, the statement seems innocuous and commonsensical. Indeed, it is almost a truism: For scholars who see replication as a basis for increased confidence in truth-claims, it makes sense to encourage data and analytic transparency. The problem is that social science writ large is composed of several disciplines encompassing a wide range of research communities that have different views on the meaning of ‘transparency’ and the possibility of genuine ‘replication.’ These views stem from epistemological priors on a range of foundational issues: what constitutes an objective ‘science’ of the social world and whether it is even possible; the nature of whatever boundary may exist between scientific and other truth claims; whether social science should be primarily oriented towards explanation, understanding, critique, or praxis; and what criteria might be employed to assess the value of a given research product. In effect, the debate over DA-RT in political science is embedded in a broader, long-standing, and ultimately unresolvable struggle over foundational questions that social scientists cannot ‘sidestep,’ as [King, Keohane and Verba \(1994\)](#) once asked us to do. Indeed, answers to these questions, however tentative, form the basis for significant epistemological diversity across research communities in various social science disciplines.

This matters because political science is not a hermetically sealed enterprise. Political scientists studying certain problems self-consciously engage audiences and form networks encompassing scholars from other disciplines. Many research traditions in political science

proceed from assumptions that have less in common with each other than with those that undergird established approaches in other disciplines. This is particularly true for the field of comparative politics, where research is differentiated not only by method and substantive topic, but also by expertise in a given country or geographic area.<sup>1</sup> Such expertise is an asset for producing case studies and comparisons that speak to problems in political science, but it also gives rise to scholarly conversations and research networks that include anthropologists, historians, and sociologists. For this reason, comparativists may want to approach the DA-RT debate with one eye on how other social science disciplines have approached the notions of transparency and replication.

The American Anthropological Association’s 2012 [statement on ethics](#) calls upon scholars to conduct research in a way that is ethical and transparent. At most, this translates into broad injunctions to ‘do no harm’ and to be ‘open and honest about your work.’ There is nothing resembling specific procedures or requirements related to data sharing or research transparency in any of the top-ranking journals such as the *American Ethnologist*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology*, and the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Importantly, this does not suggest a lack of interest in being systematic or rigorous in substantiating claims. *Cultural Anthropology*, for example, says this about submissions: “we are looking for works that offer conceptual reach and comparative relevance ...offer a rigorous approach and clear argument ...build arguments with claims proportional to data offered ...[and] suggest a reflexive attentiveness to issues of research, design, and methodology” (see [here](#)). These expectations convey that the journal still falls within a broad frame that is ‘scientific,’ but without necessitating data sharing via repositories or treating replicability as a defining component of ‘analytic rigor.’ Thus, when a comparativist doing ethnographic research declares that “I do not consider making my field notes publicly available to be a professional duty or necessity” ([Cramer, 2015, 18](#)), DA-RT proponents ought to treat this not as a marginal view in political science,<sup>2</sup> but as standard operating procedure for a style

<sup>1</sup>Despite cutbacks in federal funding for area studies ([King, 2015](#)), most comparativists continue to invest in expertise in some country/area, to attend meetings of area-based associations, and to publish some of their work in area-focused journals with cross-disciplinary readerships ([Hanson, 2008](#); [Sil, 2009](#)). Of the 29 dissertations awarded the Gabriel Almond Prize for the Best Dissertation in Comparative Politics between 1990 and 2015, all but three showcased qualitative fieldwork in a single area (even if some also included statistical analyses or field experiments).

<sup>2</sup>In fact, we see nothing marginal about political scientists who do ethnographic work as showcased in [Schatz \(2009\)](#), which was awarded the Giovanni Sartori Prize in 2010 for the best book in qualitative methods.

of research that is found in other social science disciplines — and would be considered quite mainstream in one of them.

For their part, historians certainly embrace the idea that sources employed to construct historical narratives should be accessible to other researchers. This does not, however, involve specific injunctions, since most primary source material is in archives that other scholars can access. There is an expectation that historians *producing* new sources, such as recently compiled oral histories, make such materials available in an archive or library, but this is a far cry from requirements that qualitative data be digitized and deposited so as to facilitate replication. Yet, this does not imply any lack of interest in rigor or transparency. Trachtenberg (2015), a political scientist originally trained as a historian, notes that the DA-RT statement presumes a need for scholars to alter their research practices to be more transparent when, in reality, good historical work *already* does this through precise footnoting and the clear interpretation of data (Lustick, 1996). This point is echoed in Carpenter’s (2015) report on deliberations of the editorial board at *Social Science History*: “many historians and historical social scientists, including purely narrative or ‘qualitative’ scholars, already observe an ethic of transparency and replicability in their work. By following the citations from footnotes to exact archival locations, it is possible to find the exact document or material object that a scholar was interpreting or analyzing.” Carpenter also points out that efforts to further promote transparency through digitization would skew the playing field against junior scholars and against institutions with fewer resources available to subsidize the costs of replication. The general sense among historians and historically-minded social scientists seems to be that programmatic efforts such as DA-RT are, at best, unnecessary, and at worst, likely to generate costs that will unevenly affect the incentives, output, and prospects for many perfectly capable historians.

In sociology, while scholars are increasingly engaging in debates over transparency, there has been very little progress on this front. According to Kathleen Blee, Chair of the Publications Committee of the American Sociological Association, discussions in sociology may be situated as somewhere between those in anthropology and political science in terms of developing rules and procedures related to data access and trans-

parency.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that there is more discussion than in the past, it is in part a reaction to the controversy surrounding Goffman’s (2014) ethnographic study *On the Run* (Parry, 2015) and in part a means to preempt funding agencies moving to mandate elaborate rules for projects they support. Even so, this issue has been less divisive than in political science, in part because leading journals continue to adopt flexible and varied approaches. The American Sociological Association journals, including the top-ranked *American Sociological Review*, are being asked by the ASA’s Subcommittee on Ethics Related to Research in Journal Articles, to stipulate only this: “For authors who ... plan to share the data in this article with the larger scholarly community, please indicate how these data can be accessed ... Since data sharing is optional, please skip this item if you do not plan to share your data publicly” (see [here](#)). Also significant is that the *American Journal of Sociology*, a highly ranked journal where much qualitative research is showcased, is not managed by the American Sociological Association and makes no reference to data access or transparency at the time of either submission or publication.

In effect, the debate over DA-RT in political science is embedded in a broader, long-standing, and ultimately unresolvable struggle over foundational questions that social scientists cannot ‘sidestep,’ as King, Keohane and Verba (1994) once asked us to do.

This brings us to economics, the discipline where we find the greatest proportion of leading journals with submission requirements resembling those noted in the JETS. These requirements emerged in response to an article published three decades ago (Dewald, Thursby and Anderson, 1986) that took the discipline to task for allowing inadvertent errors to stand due to the lack of replication practices, with the specific recommendation that journal editors insist on data and computer code being deposited in a public archive in advance of publication. This policy came to be adopted in 1986 by the editorial board of the *American Economic Review* (*AER*), which decided that papers would only be published if “the data used in the analysis are clearly and precisely documented, are readily available to any researcher for purposes of replication, and where details

<sup>3</sup>Personal communication with Rudra Sil, via telephone, from the Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, January 22, 2016.

of the computations sufficient to permit replication are provided” (see [here](#)). This policy remained unique to *AER* for nearly two decades before several other top economics journals, including *Econometrica* and the *Review of Economic Studies*, adopted their own variants of this policy encouraging the sharing of data and code.

At the same time, there has been no standardized effort, whether within or beyond the American Economics Association, to establish uniform procedures across the editorial boards of journals. Each journal that has adopted a policy regulating data sharing and replication has done so independently. Consequently, even among the top journals, we find significant variation. The *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, a top-five journal that ranked first in the 2015 journal citation report, has no specific requirements related to data or analytic transparency in advance of publication. *Econometrica* does have a replication policy, but half of that policy consists of statements about possible exceptions in situations where there may be ‘practical difficulties’ or where there may be a ‘particularly complicated cases.’ Going beyond the top-five journals, one study finds that 101 out of a sample of 141 journals in North America and Europe (70% of the sample) have no data sharing or replication policy of any sort ([Vlaeminck, 2012](#)).

Three additional points are worth noting. First, to the extent that economics as a discipline has claimed significant advances on major theoretical problems ([Dobrescu, 2012](#)), these have little to do with transparency or replicability. Second, research on the scholarly output of the discipline suggests that, even with the proliferation of data access policies, replication is still not very commonly practiced ([McCullough, McGeary and Harrison, 2006](#)). Those who see a problem in the discipline focus not on uniform rules or threats of censorship, but on whether there is a ‘demand’ for access to data and code because scholars invest more in replications and journals make more space to publish them ([Cochrane, 2015](#)). Third, and most important, even where replications are attempted, as [Chang and Li \(2015\)](#) sought to do for a sample of 59 articles from twelve top-ranked economics journals, fewer than half turned out to be replicable — and barely a third without assistance from the original authors! In general, as economist Francis Diebold puts it, informal social pressures — such as the reputational costs for those who repeatedly ignore requests for data and code — are more useful than

standard rules imposed from above. Diebold also notes that transparency and replicability norms emerged as a way to identify errors in quantitative analysis; there is no indication that economists view such norms as generalizable to other approaches across the discipline (e.g. theoretical economics).<sup>4</sup> Economics as a discipline neither insists on uniform rules on data-sharing and transparency, nor gives us reason to believe that such rules increase either the frequency of replications or the likelihood they would succeed.

Throughout the social sciences, we find research communities that have broad commitments to transparency and, sometimes, replicability. But, various research communities have quite different understandings of what these mean in terms of the design and evaluation of research. Against this backdrop, the adoption of DA-RT and JETS to advance objectives on which there is no consensus within or across social science disciplines feels less like an *avant-garde* move and more like the latest crusade to consolidate a familiar yet dogmatic vision of social science. In no other discipline do we see the main professional association explicitly encouraging leading scholarly journals — the majority of which it does not even publish — to adopt uniform procedures predicated on a very narrow conception of data access, transparency, and replicability. Yet, even among communities that embrace this conception, the net benefits of implementing DA-RT would at best bring a slight improvement beyond the status quo. As the experience of economics suggests, specific transparency policies help neither to incentivize replications nor to consistently replicate findings. And in political science, existing practices — peer review at the submission stage; critiques of published work; confrontations between rival arguments based on different empirics; and even replications based on the *voluntary* sharing of data and codes — already go a long way towards ensuring a more general ethos of transparency. And they do so without imposing disproportionate costs on a sizable portion of researchers in the discipline.

In inviting us to contribute to this symposium, the editors asked us to advance the discussion in ‘a positive and constructive way.’ The most positive and constructive suggestion we can offer is to leave the idea of transparency as an abstract, generalized ethos and refrain from translating it into a common set of rules and procedures to be policed through journals. It does

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<sup>4</sup>Personal communication with Rudra Sil, on the University of Pennsylvania campus, Philadelphia, PA. December 16, 2015.

not take an oracle to see that such rules and procedures would end up disproportionately favoring certain styles of research, at least in terms of opportunities for frequent publications in flagship journals and prospects for employment, promotion, and funding at leading departments. Worse, they would sharply delimit the kinds of questions scholars are willing to pose, the tools they invest in, and the research designs they pursue. In the end, there would be even less space for research based on data and procedures that cannot be cheaply, efficiently, or ethically shared in repositories in the way that quantitative data sets and computer codes can. Ironically, a project that has its roots in efforts to promote a pluralistic vision of shared standards for quantitative and qualitative research (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994; Brady and Collier, 2004) will have tilted the playing field heavily towards the former, relegating to the margins qualitative research that is not designed on the basis of a ‘quantitative worldview’ (McKeown, 2004).

The greatest cost would be borne by qualitative comparativists who invest in training and expertise (including language skills) required to grapple with archival materials or carry out fieldwork in complex social environments. For them, DA-RT would reduce the likelihood of professional rewards within their discipline while increasing the costs and challenges of publishing in leading journals — all from having to conform to requirements that many do not see as necessary or sufficient for delivering results that are definitively ‘better.’ In the end, one need not be an ethnographer to agree with Pachirat (2015, 27) that DA-RT is essentially “an increasingly institutionalized and ‘incentivized’ interpretation of transparency and openness, one which draws its strength from a specific, and contestable, vision of what political science has been — and, equally important — what it should become.” Comparativists — *cave, hic dragones*.

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